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At Chamber breakfast, Maynard discusses state prisons' impact on Hagerstown, Washington County

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With three state prisons south of Hagerstown, the Division of Correction pumps nearly \$200 million into the local economy through payroll and operating costs, Maryland's public safety chief said Wednesday morning during the Hagerstown-Washington County Chamber of Commerce's monthly Eggs and Issues breakfast.

Maryland's Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services is the state's largest agency, with an annual budget of about \$1.4 billion and about 12,000 employees, Secretary Gary D. Maynard said.

His department oversees the state's prisons, the Division of Parole and Probation and Maryland State Police.

The three prisons south of Hagerstown house about 6,000 inmates and bring at least 1,700 jobs to the area, with most of the prison's employees living in Hagerstown or Washington County, Maynard said.

Annual payroll at the three prisons is about \$117 million, and operating costs result in about \$64 million a year going to the local economy, he said.

Maynard last visited the Hagerstown-Washington County Chamber of Commerce in August 2007. During that meeting, he announced a change in the prison system's inmate-release policy.

Inmates are now released from institutions in their home regions.

Prior to the policy change, inmates from all five state prisons in Western Maryland - including two in Allegany County - were dropped off at the Greyhound bus station in Hagerstown. These inmates were expected to report to parole and probation in other jurisdictions, depending on where they were from, but some never reported, and instead stayed in Hagerstown and contributed to local crime, city officials contended.

Former state Del. Paul Muldowney on Wednesday said the inmate-release policy had been an issue in Hagerstown for at least 10 years. Maynard met with a group of local officials and "fixed it the next day," Muldowney said.

"The public owes him a tremendous debt of gratitude," Muldowney said.

Maynard on Wednesday also discussed Maryland Correctional Enterprises, the prison industry arm of the state Division of Correction. MCE was designed as a self-supporting industry system.



Gary Maynard, secretary of public safety and correctional services, speaks to Hagerstown-Washington County Chamber of Commerce members Wednesday about state prison safety and economics. (Colleen Helf/Staff Photographer)

About 400 inmates within the Hagerstown prisons are employed by MCE, he said. Maynard now wants to triple the size of MCE throughout the state, he said.

Half of MCE's profits last year were generated by Hagerstown-area prisons, Maynard said.

"It's about getting offenders skills they can use when they get out," he said.

Less than 1 percent of offenders die in prison, the secretary said.

"People are going to return to the community, either as people who are going to offend again or as law-abiding, tax-paying citizens," he said.

If inmates learn job skills, earn GEDs, get help dealing with any addictions and are reunited with their families, more than likely they won't reoffend, he said.

Responsibility for education within Maryland's prisons recently shifted from the Maryland State Department of Education to the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation. With DLLR managing the training, prison officials will be able to clearly direct offenders into job skills tracks, Maynard said.